LITERARY PROTOTYPES

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[Reprint from the UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA CHRONICLE, July, 1929]

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Until within comparatively recent years it has been thought that the Sumerians and Akkadians had expended their intellectual endeavor in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and history, and finally had exhausted their fertility in the production of religious writings.

Within the last few years, however, Akkadian texts have become available which show a distinctly literary culture. They deserve to be made accessible to a group of readers wider than that confined within archaeological cloisters, because of their intrinsic value as the earliest productions of a literary type in the history of mankind, and also because of the importance that attaches to them in the comparative study of literary history in general.

Some of these texts belong to the paranetic (hortatory) type, and, as first attempts in man's literary development, are by no means unworthy. The following excerpts are taken from a moral tract, which is said to contain the utterances of the flood hero, Utnapishtim, addressed to his children:

> As a wise and modest man you must restrain yourself.
> Let your mouth be reserved, your words be guarded;
> Like the riches of man may your speech be rare.
>
> Don't calumniate, speak well!
> Don't speak evil, speak good!
> Whoever slanders and speaks evil,
> Shamash, in requital thereof, will seek his life.

Don't talk too much, guard your lips!
The words of your bosom speak not at once;
What you say hastily now, you will wish to retract later:
Therefore, in order to keep silence, exert your will.

This tract is a poem in monologue form, comprising a series of strophes of three or four lines; other literary texts make use of the dialogue form.

While the tablets containing these texts date from the Assyrian period, the subscriptions indicate that they are copies of earlier originals. Some of them may reach back to the Classical Babylonian period, *c.* 2000 B.C., still others may even be Akkadian translations of Sumerian works. Though they were written down and copied in order to furnish entertainment, the didactic element is never lost sight of completely. This is especially true with regard to such literary types as the animal and plant fables.

The Akkadians possessed two types of animal fables; first, a kind of animal epic, that is, extensive texts developed in serials. Of these the most outstanding text fragments deal with the fox. This class of texts contains the same motives as the Greek fables: The fox is an exceedingly cunning animal in the garb of pretended piety, who cheats his opponents. In alliance with the wolf he wars upon the faithful shepherd dog. But his wicked deeds finally bring him into trouble; he is accused before the judgment seat of Shamash, and his accusers implore that capital punishment be imposed upon the culprit. Then the sly rascal begins to shed tears before the judge and defends himself most cleverly. We cannot as yet maintain for certain that the Greek fable and the Low German Reinicke *Vos* are dependent in origin on this Babylonian text, although it is a likely hypothesis; at all events, we have here the literary prototype of this comprehensive cycle of animal fables.

The second type of animal fables is couched in the form of a short story, containing either a jocular remark, or some sagacious sentence. In this group of fables is one which shows that Greece drew directly upon Babylonian material;

namely the fable of the fly and the steer as contained in the collection of fables by Babrios.[1] This writer, in fact, states that the Assyrians "who once upon a time lived in the kingdom of Ninos or Belos" are to be considered the inventors of the fable. With the fable as recorded by Babrios the Babylonian fable agrees literally with a single exception. The Greek fable substitutes the steer for the elephant, either because the Greek author had a variant Babylonian text before him (which is less likely because the parallel Arabic fable also contains the fly and the elephant) or because the elephant was little known to him and he therefore substituted the steer. The Babylonian text translation reads:

> When the fly placed itself on the elephant
> it spoke thus: "Brother, do I annoy you? At the
> watering place I shall be off."
> The elephant answered the fly:
> "That you settled on me, I did not know. What
> are you, anyway?
> That you arose, I also knew not."

The Akkadian plant fable, like the animal fable of the horse and the ox, likewise developed a literary type, i.e., the contest between various trees, whose literary form and tenor reappear in Greek literature. Here again we notice a substitution of different trees; for example, in the case of a fragment of Callimachus, the laurel and the olive tree appear instead of the Babylonian date palm and the tamarisk—a change which is self-explanatory.

An additional literary type is found in a single Babylonian text, which is unique in that it completely lacks the didactic element, its sole object being to amuse the reader.

[1] No. 84 (Schneidewin):

> *κώνωψ ἐπιστὰς κέρατι καμπύλῳ ταύρου*
> *μικρὸν τ' ἐπισχὼν εἶπε ταῦτα βομβήσας.*
> *"εἰ σοῦ βαρύνω τὸν τένοντα καὶ κλίνω,*
> *καθεδοῦμ' ἀπελθὼν ποταμίας ἐπ' αἰγείρου."*
> *ὁ δ' "οὐ μέλει μοι" φησίν "οὔτ' ἐὰν μείνῃς*
> *οὔτ' ἂν ἀπέλθῃς οὐδ' ὅτ ἦλθες ἐγνώκειν."*

It forms the prototype of the *herilia*—the dialogue of master and servant—of which, however, no literary remains have come to us from Greece or Rome, although its existence, at least in Greece, may be presupposed. For if the *herilia* as such is wanting there, we do meet with the comedy, which in some degree is a development from the *herilia*, since it is chiefly the slave servant who furnishes the intellectual spice of a Classical play; and although the hero may be a braggart soldier or some other character, it is the figure of a Palaestrio, or one of his ilk, who makes things go. In the Classical comedies the servant is generally portrayed as a clever, witty fellow, the product of a system which survived as long as the system which had engendered him remained intact. These *arguronetoi* were of course all imported. The Syrian slave-servant takes a not inconspicuous rôle in the comedies; this is indicated by the frequent employment of the name Syrus. The slave type as it appears in the comedies is little varied; and it appears always to have been cast in one and the same mould.

When Desiderius Erasmus, who laid such great emphasis on autonomy in moral matters, desired to express some of his ideas in a more literary style, he fell upon the simple dialogue form, choosing as his speakers the master, whom he significantly called Rabinus, and the servant named Syrus.

The beginning of the Akkadian *herilia* is partly broken away, but it is clear that the master wishes to drive to the palace, which the servant finds to be the proper thing to do; then the master changes his mind, and thereupon the servant changes his, also. In fact, the servant always finds a good reason for his master's wants and dislikes.

MASTER: Slave, obey me.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, yes.

MASTER: Quickly fetch water for my hands; give it to me, I will dine.

SERVANT: Dine, my master, dine; to eat one's fill is joy of heart. The sun god, even, comes to a dinner eaten with joy and clean hands.

MASTER: No, slave, I shall not dine.

SERVANT: Don't eat, my master, don't eat; to become hungry and to eat, to become thirsty and to drink, are but natural necessities of man anyway.

MASTER: Slave, obey me.

SERVANT: Indeed, my master, indeed.

MASTER: Quick, summon me the chariot; harness the horses. I want to drive into the desert (to hunt).

SERVANT: Drive, my master, drive. A hunter's stomach is always full, and the sporting dog will break the bones (of the game), while the hunting falcon will build his nest there, and the fleeing game there has its lair.

MASTER: No, slave, I will not drive into the desert.

SERVANT: Don't drive, my lord, don't drive. A hunter's mind is changeable; the sporting dog's tendons will be broken; the hunting falcon's habitation is there in the crack of the wall, and the resting place of the fleeing game is forsaken.

(Part omitted)

MASTER: Slave, obey me.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, indeed.

MASTER: Behold, I want to commit a wicked deed.

SERVANT: Yes, do, my master, yes. If you don't commit a vile action your platter will be empty. Who else will supply you in order to fill your paunch?

MASTER: No, slave, I won't act like a rascal after all.

SERVANT: Don't do it, my master, don't. Whoever commits a wrong will either be killed, or will be treated roughly, or will be maimed, or captured and thrown into prison.

MASTER: Slave, obey me.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, indeed.

MASTER: I want to love a woman.

SERVANT: Go ahead, my master, love. A man who loves a woman forgets pain and sorrow.

MASTER: No, slave, I won't love a woman after all.

SERVANT: Don't love, my master, don't love. Woman is a snare, a trap, a hole, a ditch. Woman is an iron dagger, which cuts the neck of a man.

MASTER: Slave, obey me.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, yes.

MASTER: Quick, fetch water for my hands and give it to me. I desire to make a sacrifice to my god.

SERVANT: Do, my master, do. A man who makes a sacrifice to his god fares well. He will make loan upon loan.[2]

MASTER: No, slave, I shall not make sacrifice to my god.

SERVANT: Don't do it, my master, don't do it. THUS YOU WILL TEACH GOD A LESSON, TO RUN AFTER YOU LIKE A DOG, BEGGING YOU EITHER FOR WORSHIP, OR FOR AN ASSISTANT, OR FOR SOMETHING ELSE.

MASTER: Obey me, slave.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, yes.

MASTER: Behold, I shall render assistance to my country.

SERVANT: Do, my master, do. A man who comes to the support of his country, his help lies in the ring[3] of Marduk.

MASTER: No, slave, I shall, after all, render no assistance to my country.

SERVANT: Don't do it, my master, don't do it. Climb up the ancient ruins and walk about. Behold, the skulls of the recent and earlier dead. Who was the rascal, and who he who was eager to help?

MASTER: Obey me, slave.

SERVANT: Yes, my master, yes.

MASTER: Now, then, what is good? To break my neck and your neck and to throw them in the river—that's good!

SERVANT: Who is ever so tall that he reach to the sky, and who ever so wide that he fill the whole earth?

MASTER: No, slave, I shall kill but you, and cause you to go ahead of me.

SERVANT: In that case my master will live but three days after me.

The meaning of the servant's final word is: you change your mind too often, but if you do what you now propose, I shall get you (i.e., as a ghost) within three days if you dare change your mind again.

The whole, of course, is not a dialogue of pessimism, but a Babylonian farce pure and simple.

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[2] This reminds one of the saying of Periplectomenus, in Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus:* "quod in divinis rebus sumptumst, sapienti lucrumst" (money spent on divine worship is clear gain to a wise man).

[3] Cf. the saying "his hat is in the ring." The above is an astronomical term.